

INTEGRATION OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN NATIONAL CARMAKERS

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ABSTRACT

This study will look at the concept of relationship quality (RQ) and its relationship to customer loyalty in Malaysian national carmaker. Automotive industry as one of the major contributor to Malaysian GDP which stated 3.2 per cent; has experienced a new wave with the introduction of new automotive policy called National Automotive Policy (NAP). The major challenge faced by the local manufacturer is competition with all the automotive giants in a more liberalised market. The growth in local market also dominated by non-national carmakers which can be seen from the latest report by JF APEX Securities which stated that as of November 2013, Honda and Toyota recorded 17 per cent and 14 per cent respectively (Utusan Malaysia, 2013). The way forward is how the national carmaker want to compete not only locally but going internationally to strengthen their survival in the industry or at least remain on par in Asean. Empirically, relationship quality has been recognised as one of the important aspects that breeds loyalty but received less attention in the study of customer loyalty especially in Malaysia. Therefore, a conceptual model is developed based on observed practical gap, industry reports and review of empirical literatures on RQ in multi-dimensional disciplines.

Keywords: Relationship quality, Asean, GDP, automotive industry, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

Automobile industry in Malaysia is begun in 1983 with the incorporation of the first national carmaker namely Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Berhad (PROTON). The objective of expansion into auto industry is to transform Malaysia from agriculture based country to industrialised based economy. This industry contributes to a very wide range of business segment from upstream and downstream along with end-to-end industries. Other than that, this industry has directly and indirectly benefited Malaysia in terms of knowledge and skills (Malaysian Automotive Institute, 2009). After years of its establishment, automotive industry has contributed 3.2% to Malaysian gross domestic product (GDP) and continues to succeed as important sector in Malaysian economy. The contribution also coming from the second national car manufacturer known as Perusahaan Automobile Kedua (PERODUA) who was established ten years after the incorporation of Proton. Their focus on smaller car variant contribute a lower margin compared to their counterpart; Proton. However, Perodua is known with its better performance compared to Proton where in the last 7 (seven) consecutive years, they are still on the top as the market leader with 30.2 % market share (Raja Sabaradin, 2013). Until currently, Proton and Perodua are the two national carmakers that work hand in hand to bring Malaysian auto industry as a significant contributor in economy and employment sector.

2. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIAN AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Malaysian automobile market has just experienced a new wave with the introduction of new automotive policy called National Automotive Policy (NAP). The new policy is expected to stimulate local automotive industry where foreign car manufacturer is encouraged to produce parts and cars for local sales and export purpose. Under NAP, national carmakers are no longer protected by the government and their interest and priority as

local car manufacturer has been removed. There will be more new players in the market who will challenge the dominance of Proton and Perodua and that will significantly impact the whole industry value chain. The main target of NAP is to bring national carmaker at the most competitive level in the local and international automotive market and by 2015; Malaysia is targeted to become a regional centre for hybrid and electric vehicles or energy-efficient vehicles (EEV). This new development in local auto industry will also bring Malaysian economies at least on par with other Asean counterparts. On another side, Malaysian national carmaker which competitively small are now facing with all the giants in global auto industry. The biggest challenge is the ability and readiness of the local car manufacturer to compete and remain sustainable in the industry. The stiff competition can be spotted from the recent survey done by JF APEX Securities in November 2013 which reported that the two giants in auto industry have dominated the chart where Honda grew 17 per cent and Toyota gained 14 per cent of the local sales growth (Utusan Malaysia, 2013).

The changes in the government automotive policy have been seriously highlighted by Malaysian International Trade Minister, Mustapa Mohamad who wants a more robust auto industry in Malaysia (Asian Business News, 2014). Concern on the issue of competitiveness also highlighted by CEO of Proton Edar Sdn. Bhd. (Proton's subsidiary in charge of sales), Encik Hisham Othman who said that quality and service are the main concern to capture further weakening in Proton's market share. Proton as the first Malaysian national carmaker has suffering from a major decline in market share where their portion as high as 54 per cent in 1999 has dropped to 22 per cent in the recent year 2013. In order to curb this poor performance, he added that Proton Holdings will concentrate on assurance of product quality, value for money and customer service (Bernama, 2013).

In order to remain competitive and most importantly to sustain their business, national carmakers need to know and deeply understand the factors that will make them as the first choice among other foreign carmakers. They need to strongly identify the changes in patterns of consumer behaviour with the availability of more alternatives offered by foreign carmakers; post implementation of NAP. In other words, they need to determine the most influential factors to win consumers' heart that contribute to loyalty towards national carmakers and consequently award them as the most selected car manufacturer. The changes in the business requirement has shifted business organization to move their focus from transaction strategy towards more on relational strategy (Cannière, 2010). Consistent to that, the study on the importance of high quality relationship between buyer and seller has received adequate attention by researchers such as Caceres & Paparoidamis (2007), Kim (2006), Macintosh (2007), Ndubisi (2007), Prasad & Aryasri (2008) and Wong, Hung, & Chow (2007). However, the suggestion that both academic literature and industry reports have recognized the importance of relationship quality in managing customer relationship and subsequently increased customer loyalty and retention is still arguable because there are evidences from the industry on issues of poor profit performance, reducing market share, shrinking revenue and sales growth and less competitive. Based on the described situation, this study proposed a more comprehensive model of customer loyalty with the present of relationship quality as the antecedent to customer loyalty in national carmaker. Therefore, this study is segregated into three major sections which consist of introduction, issues and challenges, literature review, conceptual model and conclusion.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 PERCEIVED QUALITY

The importance of quality has been established in empirical research and studied in multi-dimensional disciplines including marketing, legal, accounting, management and et cetera and these numerous studies has focused on many forms and research directions (Dunk, 2002; Fornell & Johnson, 1996; Gundlach & Murphy, 1993; Hwang, Radhakrishnan, & Su, 2006). Nevertheless of its importance and being research attention, the definition and operationalization of quality still remain in confusion (Getty & Getty, 2003) and deserves to receive more research works. Consistent with the research objective, this study will explore the quality from marketing perspective and to look at customer's new-vehicle purchase experience to evaluate the quality of both goods and services offered by national car manufacturers as perceived by customers. All industry can be placed somewhere along goods-service continuum (Yieh, Chiao, & Chiu, 2007). Car manufacturers are providing both goods and services simultaneously and they are fall in the middle of product-service continuum. They offer

physical goods which is the cars and also services from the interaction between the employees and the customer during the sales and after sales process. Quality in this study is assessed based on individual customer's perception (subjective) that may varies according to different person (Urban, 2010) and considers comparison with the goods and services offered by rival competitors in the same industry. A study by Fornell & Johnson (1996) measure perceived quality in relation to consumption experience and operationalized based on two constructs; customization and reliability. They explain customization as the degree that the offer meets and fulfil customer's needs and reliability refers to reliable offering, standardization and defect free.

From the review of extant literature, most of quality study in relation to relationship quality was done in the context of service industry and referred to as service quality (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007; Keating, Rugimbana, & Quazi, 2003; Pepur, Mihanović, & Pepur, 2013). The impact of service quality on relationship quality has been verified by Rauyruen & Miller (2007) then supported by Crosby *et al.* (Crosby *et al.*, 1990: as cited in Segarra-Moliner, 2013) who postulates that service quality is a precursor for relationship quality. Finally, the relationship between product and/or service quality and relationship quality further established by Hennig-thurau & Klee (1997) who suggests that the ability of a product or service to fulfil or meet with customer's needs is regarded as vital in achieving high quality relationship. However, the contribution of product quality towards trust which is one of the dimension of relationship quality has been argued by Yieh, Chiao, & Chiu (2007) who found insignificant relationship between perceived product quality and trust and another argument by Aydin & Özer (2005) stated that service quality is insufficient to generate loyalty (dependent variable in this study). These theoretical gaps can be justified as the need for perceived quality to be one of the subject matter in this research work. Furthermore, the recent practical or industry issues as explained in the introduction part and problem statement also motivate for further attention on quality as the factor that contributes to better performance of national carmakers.

3.2 RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

The focus of business organization has revolves from transactional to relational marketing where relationship quality serves as the focal point and source of competitive advantage (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007; Doaei, Rezaei, & Khajei, 2011; Vieira, 2013). The word quality used in this study on relationship quality is not referred to quality defined in the study on total quality management, service quality, product quality or any quality issues. Relationship quality refers to the study on the strength of relationship between parties involved in a relationship or relational exchange. Particularly, quality is observed in relation to interaction in the relationship between buyer and seller. The study on relationship quality initiated by Dwyer and Oh in 1987 which involved business-to-business research and in 1990 Crosby *et al.* has further established the study on retail settings (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Their early research works has created plenty of publications on relationship quality and the importance of this construct has received major attention by researchers whose their study mostly appeared in highest ranking marketing papers (Athanasopoulou, 2009).

Albeit of its importance and plentiful of publications, it still lack of consistencies on the definition and there are no universal model to fully describe relationship quality and also considered unexplored (Athanasopoulou, 2013; Ndubisi, 2007). The various definitions to describe relationship quality has been given according to the context of study for example Shemwell and Cronin in their study on relationship quality between buyer and seller has defined it in relation to relationship marketing concept that indicate the relationship magnitude or depth (Shemwell and Cronin, 1995: as cited in Dant, Weaven, & Baker, 2013). Another researcher in 90's; Hennig-thurau & Klee (1997) described relationship quality as "the degree of appropriateness of the relationship to fulfil the needs of the customer associated with the relationship". Earlier than that which is in 1987, Gummesson interprets relationship quality in relation to value and explained it as accumulated value gained during a quality interaction between a firm and its customers (Gummesson, 1987: as cited in Segarra-Moliner, 2013). When it comes to millennium year, Groonroos has brought up a new understanding of relationship quality from customer perspective and proposed relationship quality as dynamics then consistent long-term quality formation of customer relationship (Groonroos, 2000: as cited in Athanasopoulou, 2013). The recent definition of relationship

quality is given by Ismail who described it as meta-construct that reflects the relationship between parties as a whole and it comprises of some major components (Ismail, 2009: as cited in Aziz, 2013).

As a result of the non-consensuses, these researchers such as Athanasopoulou (2013); Dant et al.(2013); Clark et al.(2013); Han & Hyun (2012); Ali & Ndubisi (2011); Auruskeviciene et al.(2010) and Hyun (2010) have continuously tried to determine the dimensions, including antecedents and its consequences in various contexts. In a study involved services context, Crosby considers customer satisfaction combining with trust and excludes commitment as dimension of relationship quality for salesperson (Crosby *et al.*, 1990: as cited in Athanasopoulou, 2013). In a study on quality of relationship between market research firm and its customers, Moorman et al. measure relationship quality through researchers involvement, perceived quality of interaction as well as commitment of both parties to the relationship (Moorman, 1992: as cited in Athanasopoulou, 2013). For a bank and their corporate customers, Zineldin examines the relationship based on environment and interaction process only and never consider trust, customer satisfaction or commitment (Zineldin, 1995: as cited in Athanasopoulou, 2013). In a study between customer and their fitness centre by Athanasopoulou and Mylonakis identified a large number of dimensions up to six which consists of trust, satisfaction, commitment, bonds, cooperation and adaptation (Athanasopoulou and Mylonakis, 2009: as cited in Athanasopoulou, 2013). Even though previous research has identified various dimensions to measure relationship quality, Athanasopoulou (2013) in the recent study has posits that majority of the researchers identified only three dimensions to measure relationship quality; customer's satisfaction with the relationship, trust in the relationship and commitment given towards a successful quality relationship. The measurement of relationship quality using these three dimensions also supported by Barry & Doney (2011) who has reviewed 26 empirical studies that also using the three dimensions as measurement constructs in their study on relationship quality. As guided by the above studies justified above, this current study will also consider satisfaction, trust and commitment as measurement of relationship quality.

3.2.1 IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

The contribution of high quality relationship towards high degree of customer loyalty and subsequently breeds customer retention and profitability has been established empirically in the extant literature of various context of study. Business organization is concern for profit that will determine their business survival and source of long term sustainability. The link in the chain; relationship quality, loyalty, retention, profitability and sustainability starts from good quality relationship that contributes to pure loyalty and that loyalty will breed customer retention and it comes to the ultimate aim of business which is profit. All the above constructs have received considerable attention in the empirical research.

Currently, Cannière (2010) proposed that marketers tend to develop good quality customer-firm relationship to secure loyalty and customer retention. The high rate of retention will contribute to higher market share and increase profitability (Inguanzo, 2009). Herington & Weaven (2007) also agreed that the future business success depends upon development of customer-firm relationship. Another literature that posits the association between relationship quality and customer loyalty by Foster & Cadogan (2000) suggested that the strong and high quality relationship will result in loyalty. Strong relationship that captures loyalty will curtail customer to switch to competitors albeit they have to pay premium price for the goods and services acquired (Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2011).

The successful relationship between customer and firm is described by Schneider & Bowen (1999) as phenomenon powerful than satisfaction that may keep customer from defect and resulting to customer delights. Additional to that, Mohr & Nevin (1990) described relationship quality as an important and critical factor for business operation, performance and survival of business organization. Another literature by Keaveney (1995) claimed that among the reasons customer switch to competitor are failed service and it worsen by fail response from employees. In this situation, Schneider & Bowen (1999) further suggest that the existence of customer-firm relationship will act as a make up for the defect and with good relationship customers might overlook and ignore

the instances of poor product performance. As a result of the favourable relationship, the seller might benefit in terms of increased customer retention rate and provide opportunity for the firm to do service recovery.

The study by Reicheld claimed that customer retention even just a minor percentage, will still bring double profits to the business organization (Reicheld, 1996: as cited in Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007). This idea is supported by Ali & Ndubisi (2011) who described relationship quality in terms of personal relationship that encourage repeat purchase and promote retention to benefit the firm. The recent study by Huang, Weng, Lai, & Hu (2013) also postulated that the organization is benefited from good relationship which will generate commitment and satisfaction and consequently contribute to high degree of customer loyalty. Until recently, the researcher such as Athanasopoulou (2013) still concurred to the previous finding on the importance of high quality relationship and relational benefit gained by the parties involved by concluding that companies strive to focus on relationship building to develop a successful long term mutual beneficial rapport between firm and customer.

3.3 CUSTOMER LOYALTY

The important of loyal customer to a business organization has attracted attention of many researchers and so as the market practitioners. The intention to be the first choice among the rival competitor has seriously been addressed by organization for example Proton Edar Sdn. Bhd. as marketing arm of Proton has outlined their vision statement as “to be the customers’ first choice for automotive products and services”. For market practitioners, all their effort in developing strategy and decision making must be centred to bottom line which is profit. Any changes internally or externally must be considered in company’s strategy and strategic decision making due to its impact on loyalty level for example Michael Porter has characterised government’s policy as one of the factors that influence customer loyalty (Mannering, 1991). National carmakers as part of the participants in Malaysian automotive industry will also impact by the changes in latest government policy. This current development is an interesting topic to explore especially on the issue of loyalty towards national carmakers pre and post implementation of National Automotive Policy (NAP).

Even though loyalty is an interesting subject that has received sufficient consideration by researchers, the complexities of its definition, concept and dimension has made it a fresh topic to receive further research attention especially in the latest phenomena in Malaysian automotive industry. The review of literatures shown that loyalty is a multi-dimensional concept and this scenario has opened for debate among researchers on the number of dimensions for its measurement (Jones & Taylor, 2005). Research in the early days prefer to measure loyalty in association to tangible products related to brand (Cunningham, 1956: as cited in Donnelly, Holden, & Lynch, 2009) and focus more on behavioural loyalty rather than customer aspect (Tucker, 1964: as cited in Donnelly et al., 2009). Behavioural loyalty as described by Jones & Taylor (2005) refer to action and situation such as intention to repurchase, intention to switch to competitor and exclusive buying. Most of recent marketing literatures suggest two additional dimensions called attitudinal and cognitive dimension and resulting in total of three dimensions of loyalty; behavioural, attitudinal and composite loyalty (Jones & Taylor, 2005). According to Jones and Taylor, psychology researchers have combined attitudinal and cognitive loyalty into one and used only two dimensions; attitudinal/cognitive and behavioural loyalty. They also described attitudinal loyalty as the degree of preference, truly genuine support and including self-sacrifice and refer cognitive loyalty to willingness to pay premium price and high-class consideration to purchase (Jones & Taylor, 2005).

Other than inconsistencies in the number of dimensions to measure loyalty, researchers also failed to achieve consensus in defining loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994). Review of existing literature shows that researchers define loyalty by relating it to loyalty dimension which consists of behavioural, attitudinal and cognitive loyalty. The trend can be seen in the definition by Dick & Basu (1994) who refers loyalty based on the strength of relationship between the two dimensions which are consumer’s comparative attitude (attitudinal) and repeat patronage (behavioural). In their study, loyalty is segmented into four; true, latent, spurious and the last segment called zero loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994). The researcher such as East, Gendall, Hammond, & Lomax (2005) suggest loyalty as a single concept if it relates to only one loyalty dimension; either behavioural or attitudinal. The complex definition of loyalty which shows combination of concepts can be seen in definition proposed by Jacoby and

Chestnut which involved up to six components including behavioural and attitudinal loyalty (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978; as cited in East et al., 2005). Other than the two dimensions, Jacoby and Chestnut also relates loyalty to the concept of cognitive, affective and conative and then based on these three elements and as a modification of his earlier loyalty definition developed in 1997, Oliver (1999) further develop loyalty definition as “a deeply held commitment to consistently repurchase or re-patronize preferred product/services consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and competing marketing efforts that caused switching behaviour”. Among all the various definition found in the literature, there are one definition given by Reichheld who described loyalty in relation to relationship between firm and customer. According to Reichheld, loyalty is achieve when a customer believe on the relationship value that curtail him to switch to another supplier and stay with the company as preferred provider of goods and services (Reichheld, 2003: as cited in Riscinto-Kozub, 2008). Loyalty as defined by Reichheld is more consistent with the current study’s research objective that intent to study how the relationship quality mediates the relationship between perceived quality and customer loyalty.

4. RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

In the next section, we provide the diagram to illustrate the proposed framework and followed by hypotheses which are developed to study the relationship between perceived quality and customer loyalty in national carmaker with the present of relationship quality as mediator.

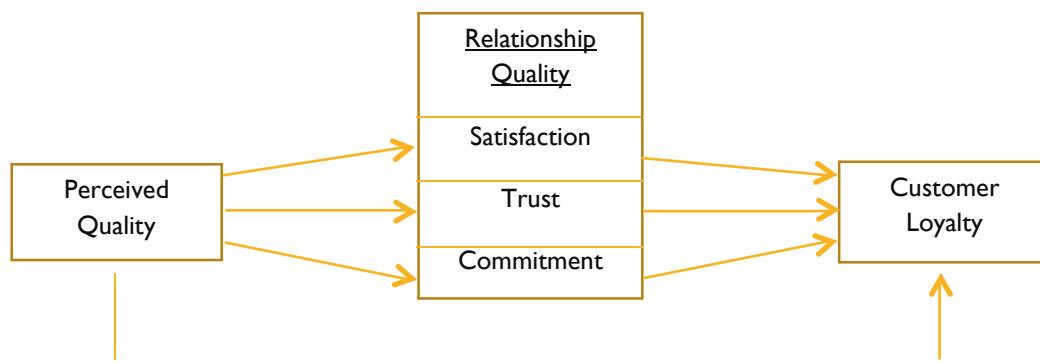


Figure 4.1: Proposed Conceptual Frameworks

4.1 RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H1a: Perceived quality is positively related to customer loyalty in national carmakers.

H1b: Perceived quality is positively related to customer satisfaction in national carmakers.

H1c: Perceived quality is positively related to trust in national carmakers.

H1d: Perceived quality is positively related to commitment in national carmakers.

H2a: Satisfaction on national carmakers has strong positive influence on customer loyalty.

H2b: Trust on national carmakers has strong positive influence on customer loyalty.

H2c: Commitment on national carmakers has strong positive influence on customer loyalty.

H3a: Customer satisfaction positively mediates the relationship between perceived quality and customer loyalty.

H3b: Trust positively mediates the relationship between perceived quality and customer loyalty.

H3c: Commitment positively mediates the relationship between perceived quality and customer loyalty.

5. CONCLUSION

The relationship between perceived quality and customer loyalty has been established in empirical study (Fornell & Johnson, 1996) and relationship quality also has been established as the factor that contribute to loyalty (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007). However, the study on relationship quality in automotive industry especially involves Malaysian national carmakers is still received lack of attention (Athanasopoulou, 2013) and the theoretical findings on the importance of relationship quality towards customer loyalty and firm's performance also still arguable due to unfavourable bottom line of national carmakers. The current development in Malaysian automotive industry and the theoretical gap on under research in relationship quality have also motivated the researcher to include relationship quality as one of the construct in current study's conceptual framework. The major contribution of this study that will add to the body of knowledge will come from the inclusion of customer relationship in a more comprehensive framework of customer loyalty in national carmaker especially Malaysian automotive industry.

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